



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 714 September 2025

Abstract | This paper presents results from a study that investigated the perspectives of victim-survivors about post-custodial measures for people with convictions for sexual offending (PCSOs). It addressed the question: what are victim-survivors' reasons for supporting or opposing a wide range of PCSO post-custodial measures?

The study involved qualitative interviews with 26 victim-survivors of sexual violence. It found that victim-survivors were supportive of PCSOs being subject to a range of measures, including electronic monitoring, (non-public) sex offender registers, psychological interventions, parole supervision and Circles of Support and Accountability. In contrast, victim-survivors had very mixed views about public sex offender registers. The study emphasises the importance of considering victim-survivor perspectives in shaping post-custodial interventions for PCSOs.

Victim-survivors' perspectives on post-custodial measures for people with convictions for sexual offending

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Introduction

The number of persons with convictions for sexual offending (PCSOs) in Australian prisons is increasing rapidly (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Because almost all PCSOs will be released from prison back into the community, it is vital to consider the post-custodial measures that can most effectively reintegrate PCSOs into the community and minimise the risk of reoffending. In Australia, a range of such measures has been introduced, including electronic monitoring, therapeutic treatment, reintegration support and Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA; Bartels, Walvisch & Richards 2019).



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Conceptually, these post-custodial measures might be understood as situated along a spectrum from *containment*-oriented to *assistance*-oriented (Socia et al. 2020; Spoo et al. 2018).

Containment-oriented policies (eg offender registers, electronic monitoring) attempt to control the PCSO via a range of requirements and restrictions, whereas assistance-oriented strategies (eg support groups, housing assistance), aim to improve a PCSO's successful reintegration into the community via the provision of support (Socia et al. 2020).

It is important to consider the views of victim-survivors of sexual violence when developing policy around the post-custodial management of PCSOs, because victim-survivors possess unique knowledge (Herman & Wasserman 2001) and can draw on their experience to provide criminal justice decision-makers with relevant information and enhance offender accountability in the post-custodial period. However, victim-survivors' views on post-custodial measures for PCSOs have rarely been investigated. A few studies (Craun, Kernsmith & Butler 2011; Koon-Magnin 2015; Levenson et al. 2007; Levenson, Fortney & Baker 2010) have found no significant differences in support for PCSO registers between those who were sexually abused as children and the general public. Spoo et al. (2018) surveyed 1,173 American undergraduate psychology students, of whom 129 (11%) reported having been sexually victimised. They found that victim-survivors were more supportive of mandatory treatment for PCSOs but less supportive of community notification than the remainder of the sample (Spoo et al. 2018).

Research by Richards, Death and McCartan (2020) and Richards et al. (2020) found that victim-survivors' views about post-custodial interventions for PCSOs were primarily *instrumental* (reflecting pragmatic concerns about preventing harm against others) and *prospective* (reflecting a concern with preventing future sexual offending rather than continuing to punish PCSOs for past offending; see Richards, Death & McCartan 2020; Richards et al. 2020; Richards, Death & Ronken 2021; see also McGlynn, Downes & Westmarland 2017). In that research, victim-survivors favoured close monitoring of the PCSO by authorities and help for the PCSO to address offending-related needs and avoid reoffending.

Critically, Richards, Death and McCartan (2020) and Richards et al. (2020) report that victim-survivor views about post-custodial interventions for PCSOs are inherently intertwined with their views about PCSO accountability and treatability. In short, if a PCSO is considered to have served an appropriate sentence and has demonstrated remorse and accepted responsibility for the offending, the PCSO is seen as both more deserving of, and more amenable to, post-custodial measures.

Richards, Death and Ronken's (2021) qualitative interviews with victim-survivors found broad support for CoSA, an intervention through which PCSOs are supported by volunteers to re-enter the community after serving time in prison. In the main, victim-survivors endorsed the additional monitoring of PCSOs that CoSA would offer, as well as the social supports and structure that participating in a CoSA would provide to PCSOs. That research found that victim-survivors only endorsed CoSA in instances in which the PCSO had demonstrated accountability (as per the above discussion) or 'personal commitment to behavioral change' (Richards, Death & Ronken 2021: 903).

A key limitation of the piecemeal existing literature is that, for the most part, samples comprise mainly white women (see, for example, Clark 2010; Craun & Simmons 2012; Miller 2014; Richards, Death & Ronken 2023). Indeed, it appears that nothing has been documented about male victim-survivors' views about post-custodial measures for PCSOs, despite prior research showing gender differences in punitiveness (Dodd 2018; Gault & Sabini 2000; Haynes & Cares 2015) and support for rehabilitation (Dodd 2018; Falco & Turner 2014) and reintegration (O'Sullivan et al. 2017; Ouellette, Applegate & Vuk 2017).

The current study

The research reported here sought to examine these knowledge gaps and address the following research question: what are victim-survivors' reasons for supporting or opposing a wide range of PCSO post-custodial measures (electronic monitoring, offender registers, community notification, parole supervision, psychological interventions and CoSA)?

The research adopted a qualitative approach and examined the opinions, beliefs and in-depth, nuanced and complex experiences (Bayens & Roberson 2011: 24) of victim-survivors of sexual violence. Victim-survivor participants were recruited into the study either through an online survey examining victim-survivor views about post-custodial measures for PCSOs or directly via social media advertisements or communications from a project partner agency (eg Bravehearts Foundation, Blue Knot Foundation and Survivors and Mates Support Network). Individuals were eligible to participate in an interview if they:

- self-identified as a victim-survivor of sexual violence;
- were aged 15 years or over; and
- currently resided in Australia.

The interviews were semi-structured, designed to obtain rich qualitative data. The interview questions were mostly open-ended, to capture detailed narratives from participants in their own words (Herron 2023). The interviews were undertaken by a member of the research team, either in person or by telephone, depending on logistics and the preference of the interviewee. Prospective participants were given the option of a male or female and Aboriginal or non-Indigenous interviewer. The literature on researching male victim-survivors of gendered violence suggests that male participants are more likely to feel comfortable with female researchers; Weare and Hulley (2023: 2247) recommend that at least one interviewer is female. The interviews lasted a little over an hour on average and were audio recorded with the consent of each participant. They were conducted one on one or in small groups of up to six participants (for more detail, see Richards et al. 2025). A waiver of parental consent was obtained for participants under 18 years of age, on the grounds that it would be contrary to the best interests of the young person to obtain consent from their parents or guardians, especially in circumstances in which the sexual violence was committed by a parent or guardian, which would put the young person's safety and wellbeing at risk. However, no participants under 18 years could be recruited, and this remains an area for future research to investigate.

Twenty-six victim-survivors (seven women and 19 men, including one trans man) were interviewed for the study. Almost all had experienced child sexual abuse. One participant had not experienced child sexual abuse but had been sexually assaulted as an adult, and three participants had experienced sexual violence as both children and adults. Of the interviewees who provided their age, the average age was 51 (range=29–73 years). Only seven of the interviewees reported that their perpetrator(s) had been imprisoned, reflecting the fact that most perpetrators of sexual violence are not reported, charged or prosecuted (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020; Daly & Bouhours 2010). In four of these cases, the perpetrator had been imprisoned for sexual offences against victim-survivors other than the interviewee.

Interview transcripts were imported into software program NVivo, and the data were coded both deductively (ie categorised according to predetermined themes) and inductively (ie according to new factors that emerge; Hsieh & Shannon 2005). A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), seeking to explore the views, perceptions and experiences of participants (Caulfield & Hill 2014), as well as convergences and divergences across these (Mason 2018), was then undertaken (for more detail, see Richards et al. 2025).

Key findings

Electronic monitoring

Electronic monitoring can be defined as ‘the use of an on-body device (eg anklet or bracelet) to track the whereabouts of an individual’ (Hwang et al. 2021: 482). It was explained to participants in the study as:

The use of an electronic device (eg anklet) that sends signals to correctional officers so they know where the offender is, and whether they are sticking to the conditions of their release (eg a curfew or staying within set geographical areas).

Electronic monitoring is widely used in states and territories across Australia for PCSOs at various stages in the criminal justice process (Bartels & Martinovic 2017).

Most victim-survivors expressed support for electronic monitoring. Victim-survivors supported electronic monitoring of released PCSOs on primarily utilitarian grounds (ie they believed that electronic monitoring would have a practical benefit). That is, they believed providing an external locus of control would reduce a PCSO’s risk of reoffending and provide an investigative tool for any subsequent police investigations into a PCSO’s conduct. Brian stated that, with electronic monitoring in place:

There would be a record of where they were and when they were there. If someone comes up and says, ‘this person did this to me here at this time’, you [police] can look at their records and go, ‘that’s where they were’.

However, many victim-survivors held reservations about electronic monitoring because they were of the view that PCSOs could disable or remove electronic tracking devices or ‘cheat’ the monitoring system. Rick said: ‘There are people who remove those things or otherwise disable them.’ A couple of interviewees noted that electronic monitoring could not prevent PCSOs committing offences online.

Sex offender registers and community notification

Apart from Western Australia's semi-public sex offender register, which enables members of the public to apply to receive targeted information about a PCSO (see <https://www.wa.gov.au/service/security/law-enforcement/access-registered-sex-offender-information>), Australian states and territories do not currently have public sex offender registers. Policing agencies in each state and territory do, however, have access to non-public offender registers designed to support police to investigate and monitor PCSOs. The National Child Offender System allows police to share information about PCSOs across jurisdictions (see <https://www.acic.gov.au/services/protection-services>).

In the current study, victim-survivors were asked their views about both non-public registers (defined as a process that 'requires offenders to give identifying information (eg their address and employer) to the police so that the police can monitor their movements. Information is **not** available to the public') and community notification (defined as the 'targeted dissemination of a PCSO's information to certain relevant people such as victims, witnesses, and neighbours'; Duwe 2015). Inevitably, interviewees discussed the merits of both public and non-public registers. Indeed, interviewees often discussed public registers in more depth than non-public registers.

There were few objections among victim-survivors to *non-public* sex offender registers, designed to support the work of police (although some interviewees raised potential privacy concerns).

In contrast, and noting that Australian states and territories do not currently have fully public sex offender registers, victim-survivors' views about public sex offender registers and community notification policies were very mixed. Support for public registers was commonly based on victim-survivors' belief that providing members of the public with information about convicted PCSOs would equip them to prevent sexual reoffending. Jessica argued:

As a victim myself, I would—you know, want to know if I'm living in an area that's full of like sexual offenders. Or if you're—if you have a family and young children and just would like to know that kind of information.

Victim-survivor interviewees also raised a range of concerns about public sex offender registers and/or community notification. These included the victim-survivors of sexual offending being identified along with PCSOs, and victim-survivors being 'triggered', shamed or retraumatised by the public release of such information. Victim-survivors also raised concerns about vigilante activity targeting registered PCSOs, the impacts on PCSOs' reintegration prospects and the potential for public registers to create anxiety and fear or a false sense of security among the community. To address these issues, some victim-survivor interviewees recommended that public sex offender registers be reserved for specific groups of PCSOs (such as repeat or high-risk PCSOs) or that a modified version of a public register involve the release of only some PCSO information (eg the PCSO's name but not their address). Jayden argued:

I think an image, a name [should be publicly released]. Their offence, what they've committed. I'd say that's pretty much it. Like I said, I heard people say that they want perpetrators' addresses on there and stuff on there. I think that's a bit much.

Psychological interventions

PCSOs commonly receive (or are required to participate in) psychological treatment programs following their release from custody. Such programs are designed to support treatment gains made during custody and help PCSOs to apply those gains in the post-custodial environment (Youssef 2022). In the present study, psychological intervention was defined as ‘Individual or group counselling with a qualified psychologist aimed at stopping reoffending’.

Most victim-survivor interviewees expressed support for PCSOs receiving psychological treatment following their release from prison, to support PCSOs to gain an understanding and address the causes of their harmful behaviour and avoid reoffending. Simon stated:

I think then you can sort of break down the thought processes or the excuses people are making or the unmet needs, because sometimes people have unmet needs and they can get those needs met in a more healthy way.

Victim-survivors often considered that such interventions need to be ongoing, mandated, rigorous and specialised. However, a few victim-survivors questioned the value of psychological support where the PCSO lacks remorse or a genuine commitment to reform. Hunter said:

I guess that they [psychological interventions] only work if people want to do them. I would imagine there'd [need to] be some remorse and some admission of guilt for that to work.

Parole supervision

Parole can be understood as a process that ‘allows a prisoner to serve part of their sentence of imprisonment in the community, subject to certain conditions’ (McLachlan 2021: 122). In the current study, victim-survivor interviewees were informed:

A person on parole has to stick to the conditions of their release from jail (eg curfew) and is supervised by a Parole Officer. If they don't, they may be returned to prison to complete their sentence. Parole gives support to an offender to re-enter the community, rather than allowing them to leave jail without supervision or support.

Victim-survivors supported parole supervision as an additional layer of monitoring of released PCSOs to assist with the PCSOs' release into the community and reduce the risk of reoffending. In Lisa's words, ‘[Parole] ensures the continuation of monitoring ... you still need to have that monitoring, you still need to have the checks and balances in place.’

Concerns raised by victim-survivors related to parole being granted early and the effectiveness of parole, given high-profile cases of paroled PCSOs who had committed serious sexual offences and even murder. Victim-survivors were unsupportive of parole if they understood this to mean early release from prison but were generally supportive of parole supervision provided the PCSO had already served a sufficient prison sentence.

Circles of Support and Accountability

CoSA emerged in Canada 30 years ago and since then these programs have been implemented in criminal justice systems across the west (Richards, Death & McCartan 2020). In this study, CoSA programs were defined as:

... groups of trained community volunteers who meet regularly with a sexual offender when he is released from prison over a period of at least a year. The group aims to provide support for the offender (eg emotional support, guidance, and practical support—housing, health etc). They also hold the offender accountable (eg by ensuring he sticks to the conditions of his release). They are a sounding board for the offender if he is struggling with inappropriate sexual thoughts etcetera.

Victim-survivors were mainly supportive of CoSA as a way to reduce the ostracism that released PCSOs are likely to experience, to assist with PCSOs' transition from prison back to the community, and to offer an additional layer of monitoring of released PCSOs. Jayden stated:

I would definitely support something like that ... it would offer a perpetrator a sense of community to a certain extent. Because I think if you ostracise people and you make them feel alone, they're going to act out ... If you completely isolate someone I think it's just a recipe for disaster.

This was subject to CoSA being offered to remorseful PCSOs, or those who display a genuine commitment to reform. Vanessa argued: 'I think it's—it sounds like a wonderful organisation. It sounds like a wonderful program that—[but] it comes back to the severity of the person's actions'.

Finally, while victim-survivors could see value in the CoSA approach, they were adamant that PCSOs should not receive CoSA at the expense of victim-survivors receiving requisite support. Jai stated: 'I'm supportive of it, and for sure they need [support but], I mean, look, I can't even get that service for myself.'

Discussion

This is the first study to investigate victim-survivors' views about specific post-custodial measures for PCSOs other than CoSA. It is also the first of its kind to primarily involve male victim-survivors. Five key points emerge from this study.

Firstly, there is a 'kaleidoscopic' (McGlynn & Westmarland 2019) quality to victim-survivor views of PCSO post-custodial measures—their views are highly varied, complex and often shifting and/or incongruous. This highlights the need for lawmakers and policymakers to engage with victim-survivors to gain insight into these multifaceted views. Secondly, except for public sex offender registers, victim-survivors generally support the delivery of multiple, interconnected post-custodial measures with the aim of reducing the risk of recidivism following the release of a PCSO from prison. Thirdly, victim-survivors' support for post-custodial measures was generally based upon utilitarian grounds, thus challenging the stereotype of victim-survivors as angry and irrational (see further Richards et al. 2025). This is probably a result of victim-survivors knowing their perpetrators and thus having more nuanced views about perpetrators than other members of the public (Harper, Hogue & Bartels 2017). Fourthly, victim-survivors saw value in both *containment*-oriented and *assistance*-oriented post-custodial measures (Socia et al. 2020), but only for PCSOs who demonstrate remorse. Fifthly, victim-survivors' support for assistance-oriented measures is contingent on such measures being delivered alongside equitable support for victim-survivors.

Limitations

This is a qualitative study, and the findings of the research presented here should not be considered generalisable to all victim-survivors. Victim-survivors' perspectives about criminal justice responses are likely to be informed by a variety of factors, such as their relationship to the perpetrator(s), their age at the time of experiencing the sexual violence and the extent and nature of the sexual violence (Herman & Wasserman 2001). Variables such as these have not been controlled for in the current exploratory study but could be examined in future research.

Another limitation is the relatively small sample size of 26 victim-survivors. Nonetheless, the study's methodology has several key strengths, including a sample predominantly comprising victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, providing cohesion. The study's focus on primarily male victim-survivors also offers an advance over previous research, which has used samples of mostly female victim-survivors.

Implications for policy, practice and service delivery

A number of implications for policy, practice and service delivery stem from the findings of the research. Results from the research should give confidence to governments to consider implementing a range of evidence-based post-custodial measures designed to prevent sexual recidivism. While very punitive and populist post-custodial measures (primarily public sex offender registers) are often proposed as being in the interests of victim-survivors (Remeikis 2019), the present study suggests that victim-survivors are amenable to a wide range of post-custodial interventions for PCSOs, informed by a strong commitment to preventing sexual harm to others. Indeed, because victim-survivors expressed a wide variety of views about public sex offender registers (including some misgivings), victim-survivors' views about public sex offender registers should be more systematically documented if calls for public registers (eg Remeikis 2019) continue.

Given the value that victim-survivors place on psychological treatment and parole supervision, and the evidence about the effectiveness of these measures (Gannon et al. 2019; Wan et al. 2014) in reducing reoffending, state and territory government resourcing for these measures could be strengthened. As a corollary, enhanced investment may be required into the development of a future workforce with the necessary skills and qualifications to deliver specialised treatment and supervision to PCSOs.

Finally, because victim-survivors expressed some support for CoSA, and previous research has demonstrated cautious support for CoSA among victim-survivors (Richards, Death & McCartan 2020; Richards, Death & Ronken 2021; Richards et al. 2020), governments could consider further implementation of CoSA beyond the one program currently in operation in Australia (Richards, Death & McCartan 2020; Richards et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The research presented here is the first study into victim-survivor perspectives on post-custodial interventions that used a sample predominantly comprising men. It therefore makes a modest but important contribution to advancing knowledge on this topic and provides a platform on which future research can build. Despite this, future research with larger, representative samples of all genders would be required to demonstrate the extent of victim-survivor support for post-custodial interventions for PCSOs.

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ISSN 1836-2206 (Online) ISBN 978 1 922877 87 1 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77871>

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